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Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth
Branch Connecticut Society
of the
Sons of the American Revolution



Random Notes *on*
Colonial Furniture

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A Connecticut Chest.

Gift

Author

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Random Notes on Colonial Furniture

I have entitled this paper Random Notes on Colonial Furniture, for the reason that within recent years so much has been written on the broad subject of Colonial Furniture, so many books, some of them valuable and most of them informing to some degree, so that any one who cares may readily familiarize himself with the general history of household furniture and its various styles and periods;—but the minor and perhaps unessential, but none the less interesting, details of construction and domestic environment have been neglected to a certain extent, and it is of these that I will, if you please, in a desultory and fragmentary manner confine myself, in the hope of possibly bringing to your attention a few facts that may not be altogether trite.

It is the furniture and household utensils of New England that principally engages our attention and most interests us, although we may not entirely neglect other sections of the country, and I would like to emphasize the fact which I think has been somewhat overlooked, that the

furnishings of the early colonial homes were practically all of domestic construction. They were homemade; very simple were they generally, as was the life and as were the requirements of the settlers themselves;—fashioned in a way along the lines and following the styles of the furniture of the period, of the land from which they emigrated, but with a certain distinctive quality that marked them one hundred per cent American.

It was formerly characteristic of a piece of ancient furniture especially if at all important, that it must of necessity have been made in the old country, and on very many occasions I have been informed with pride regarding certain articles absolutely and undeniably native, that they had been “brought over”, or “brought out,” by certain of the owner’s worthy forbears, oft-times with the exact dates and all attendant circumstances.

I have a so called “Connecticut chest”, which came to me accompanied by a carefully inscribed label, narrating minutely its history, which was to the effect that it was brought by a revered ancestor of the former owner, to Lyme, Connecticut, from Plymouth, England, in 1660. The date was not far out of the way. Another specimen I wot of, whereon appears an elaborate silver plate, engraved with a full account of its English origin, the date of its importation and the various vicissitudes of its long and eventful life. The particular pieces here re-

ferred to are built of materials not found abroad, and while upwards of sixty examples have been discovered in Connecticut alone, nothing similar appears in English collections or in English technical books.

The furniture "brought over" in the Mayflower has become proverbial. In that connection I can but recall a cynical remark of our always emphatic, late ex-fire chief, who speaking sardonically in regard to the passengers rather than the freight of that historic vessel, declared that it must have had a profanely big steerage! But it really had not. Authorities do not altogether agree regarding the exact size of this vessel, but according to the best information that I have been able to obtain, the Mayflower was but 82 feet in length over all; 22 feet beam, with a depth of 14 feet, and of 120 tons displacement; and having on board 102 passengers and the crew. By comparison the Leviathan is 907 feet long, 100 feet beam, and has a displacement of 69,000 tons,—and as a troop ship during the war carried between 12,000 and 13,000 people from France to New York in seven days. Hardly much opportunity for the Mayflower to bring a quantity of furniture to Plymouth, or indeed anything else save the crowded precious souls who were to have such a profound influence in the building of a nation.

In Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth, are shown several important articles of household furniture, which are supposed to have been brought to our

shores on the Mayflower or the vessels immediately following her. It is not impossible. But the wainscot chair of Governor Winslow there exhibited is indubitably of American white oak. And the wonderful oaken cradle, and the "Brewster chair" so called, hitherto regarded as unique, have each been surpassed by examples unearthed during the last few years, in certain towns of Eastern Massachusetts. Chairs of the so called "Brewster" and "Carver" type, by the way, are not seen in English collections.

The curious wicker cradle there shown might indeed have been brought with the Pilgrims from Holland, as an absolute necessity for the expected little Oceanus Hopkins or Peregrine White,—although the voyage proved much longer than was anticipated,—for in old Colony days it was considered impossible to bring up a baby without a cradle. Apropos of infantile requirements of the time, I would mention that among our personal treasures are some baby corsets—about four inches long,—and my great grandmother is said to have remarked that she couldn't bear to handle a baby unless it were *stayed*.

The very important fact to consider is that the early settlers of New England,—the Pilgrims, and a few years later the Puritans,—after providing for a shelter and sustenance, turned their attention to the making of homes, and in what seems to us an astonishingly short time, were producing articles of comfort as well

as those of necessity, and soon even attempted a certain ornamentation of their household furnishings. The low chest was one of the earliest articles of household use as well as the most essential, serving as it did as a repository for goods and a seat as well.

The first houses of course were but shelters, and bare of everything but roof, walls and chimney, but the rude benches and tables of rough slabs with sticks driven into auger holes for legs, were very soon superseded by stools and forms, and even chairs of most creditable turning, done on the foot lathe, but with much excellence of line.

The early court registers still preserved, furnish many interesting facts regarding the primitive house furnishings, those of Massachusetts being perhaps the most voluminous and instructive, although in the catalogue of the personal effects of Governor Theophilus Eaton for instance, of New Haven Colony, made in 1657, much information is to be found.

The records of the Essex County Probate Court for the years 1636 and after, contain many inventories in which every little article in an estate is mentioned, be it important or otherwise. Given one of the houses of the period of which there are several in existence, and it is possible in imagination to reconstruct the home of an early settler, not only to repeople, but to re-furnish it. The "Fairbanks house" in Dedham,



A chair of most creditable turning.

Massachusetts, supposed to have been built in 1638, and the "Parson Capen house" in Topsfield, dated 1683 on the summer beam, and now restored with good judgment, are excellent examples of the first real houses succeeding the hovels and log huts. The latter, the minister's house, was a little structure of but four rooms and a chimney, and one can readily fancy the household arrangements and the home life therein.

In the Massachusetts records referred to there are mentioned as in estates of Salem and the neighboring towns between the years 1636 and 1664, some two hundred chests alone, with about one hundred and fifty chairs, many benches, forms and stools, as well as cabinets, cupboards, desks, dressers, settles, tables, cradles, and beds. Among the chests named are wainscot chests, oak chests, an occasional carved chest, and old pine chests. It is thought that the early mention of pine furniture referred to any article of soft wood. Whitewood was much used. It is highly probable that as time went on chests may have been brought to this country in the form of luggage,—as boxes containing goods. But if so, it is likely that they were boxes only or sea chests, which have long since been destroyed, for while the period mentioned is early for what we term the Colonial carved chest, in my experience I have never seen an oaken chest of *early* American usage that I could feel certain was of English origin.

Documentary evidence regarding the construction or the source of our early furniture is very meager. Correspondence was negligible, accounts scanty and transcient, and about the only memorandums preserved are in the form of wills and inventories. Illuminating facts are found in the will of Thomas Emerson of Ipswich, made in 1653, in which are mentioned the "great carved chest & the carved box, and a small carved chest",—and particularly and important as indicating domestic construction, in the will of Thomas Wells of Ipswich, dated 1666, wherein he gives "unto my son Thomas Wells * * * * the little chist, & table (he made) that stands in the Hall chamber, & my white boxe, and the chist planks to make him a chist on". The testator also bequeaths to "Abigail my wife the best chest and the inlayed boxe with T:W upon the lidd"; also, generous soul, "and one halfe of the putter that was her own fathers". His daughters also receive chests. "Also my will is, that every of these my Daughters, shall have each of them a bible & every of them a good chist".

As the furniture became more elaborate, its construction,—instead of every man being his own cabinet maker,—came into the hands of specialists, men who had the taste and ability to create pieces well made and of good lines; and chests, particularly those of certain especial types, apparently were made by comparatively few persons, a single family perhaps, insomuch

that examples of these varieties exhibit a close family resemblance. Possibly the Thomas Wells, Jr. mentioned,—although at this time a student at college,—may have been a regular chest maker to some extent.

Other evidence there is that our early carved and ornamented chests were produced here, by our own people, besides the distinctively local characteristics of the materials used. In 1645 a furnace was erected at Saugus by Joseph Jenks, where bog iron ore was smelted, using charcoal instead of coke, and in a very short time this and other furnaces were producing considerable quantities of cast iron articles, even creditable hollow ware. Special privileges were conferred by the General Court upon Jenks and his associates, which later aroused the resentment of the settlers and resulted in their persecution. However, Jenks seems to have been a man of wonderful resource and ability, and he is reputed to have built the first wire drawing machine used in this country, and the first fire engine; to have invented the long scythe, and of especial interest, to have cut the dies from which were struck the pine tree coins by John Hull, the first mint master of the colonies.

In Essex Institute in Salem, is an old fire-back cast at the Jenks furnace in 1660, for a fireplace in the home of John and Alice Pickering. These firebacks were very generally ornamented with carvings in relief of biblical or allegorical figures, or armorial bearings. In this

instance, apparently no carver was at hand to serve as model maker and the wooden model for the heavy casting was fashioned by a maker of chests. A little of the typical low relief chest carving shows in this fireback, but the prominent features consist of the drops or "split spindles" and bosses, identical in form and size with the ornaments used on the Massachusetts and Connecticut chests of the period. This model maker simply attached to the ground, certain of his chest turnings in an attractive pattern, and a wonderfully interesting and historic bit of home-making resulted. And this, by the way, dates that particular type of chest rather earlier than had heretofore been supposed.

About 1638 the first meeting house in Marblehead was built on Burial Hill, and some ten years later eight pews of oak were placed in the center of the church. The end panels of two of these pews are preserved in the Colonel Lee Mansion, now the fitting home of the Marblehead Historical Society. But for the fact that they are known to be portions of a pew, they might well be fragments of an oaken chest. They were constructed by a chest maker, and the mouldings were worked out with his especial tools.

The materials of an early New England chest are almost invariably white oak and yellow pine. The former was of selected wood, "rived" or split from the log in a manner called quartering, that is at right angles to the concen-

tric growth rings, thereby obtaining the beautiful flecking of the grain. The riving knife, or "fro", had a wide and very heavy blade set at a right angle to the wooden handle, somewhat like a modern hay knife, and slabs were struck from a block with a mallet. In a very old saw-mill I once saw a primitive machine for riving shingles, and these, split and shaved, lasted indefinitely.

These chests were framed structures, that is put together with mortise and tenon, no glue was employed, and the few hand wrought nails used were in the drawers and sometimes for fastening on the back, the joints being held together with pins which were usually square,—an instance where a square peg fitted a round hole to advantage. The holes in the mortise and tenon were not bored to exactly register, hence when the pin was driven into place, the joint was drawn together very tightly. This method was termed "draw bore", and prevailed in the framing of houses and in the construction of much other furniture.

And referring again to the primitive furnaces, it were well to mention that until such time as hollow ware was attempted, and indeed for long after, most of the castings were produced in open moulds, that is no flask was used, but the molten metal was poured directly into the sand mould until it was full. This is very plainly indicated in the old firebacks, and many of the early cast andirons and stove plates.

The records referred to show very plainly that as the years went on the settlers increased their home furnishings and their comforts rapidly. Cushions and draperies are frequently mentioned in the inventories. In 1653,—but twenty-five years after the Massachusetts Bay settlement,—John Buddolph came down to Salem from Andover with rye to exchange for supplies. Among the articles he took home with him were sugar, a bird whistle, and a doll. Fancy toys on sale in Salem only twenty-five years after Endicott's first emigration! I like to think of that doll and imagine its baby mother!

Much of the building material, of course, was gotten out with the axe and shaped in the saw pit. However, mills came in very early. The first saw mill in Plymouth Colony was established in Scituate in 1640. In Mr. Joseph O. Goodwin's history of East Hartford, is mentioned the purchase of land on the Hockanum in 1639, for the purpose of establishing a saw mill. While, as stated, the chests were usually constructed of rived oak planks, I have seen several where the drawer fronts were unquestionably sawn out. The dwellings of the time made little pretensions to beauty, and in the matter of furniture, utility prevailed over elegance. But while the mechanical creations of the present day are amazing, the work of men's hands has deteriorated. It is true that certain of the old hand work productions can now

hardly be imitated. Workmen have neither the patience nor the training,—they are taught to run a machine, but the cunning of the hand has been lost. For years I have believed and insisted that many of the early and quaint brasses,—handles and pulls—were manufactured locally. Slight differences are perceptible between many of the trimmings on English pieces, and those very similar on Colonial furniture of the same period. It is difficult now to have a fine old brass handle properly reproduced. I have had experienced brass founders tell me that certain old plates not much thicker than blotting paper were never cast, and to thus make some of the elaborately pierced brasses by that method was impossible, as the molten metal would not retain its fluidity long enough to fill the ramifications of the mould. Let me say that until the later embossed plates were used, all the old brass handles were cast, and some of the work done one hundred and fifty years or more ago is a reproach to our modern founders. Thin plates of finest texture are practically perfect from the moulds,—smooth and with no traces of a file. The very early plates are often referred to—and that too in many of the books—as chased or engraved. This is not the case; the ornamentation was done with stamps instead of a burin, as was also the later “engraved” work on Sheffield plate. Every brass tack used on 18th century furniture as trimming was cast in one piece, and the head subsequently smoothed

and polished, and to trim a sofa, for instance, a thousand tacks would be required.

Mr. Alfred C. Prime, of Philadelphia, who recently compiled from the 18th century newspapers of that city the advertisements relating to furniture and its manufacture, discovered one of a brass worker of about 1750 who, on opening a branch establishment in Annapolis, offered to furnish brass firedogs, shovel and tongs heads, and furniture trimmings, all finished in the best manner.

Most of the furniture of olden times was constructed of excellent material, and was of best workmanship.

“In those elder days of art,
Workmen wrought with greatest care
Each unseen and hidden part,
For the Gods see everywhere.”

There was no factory work. In his little shop the cabinet maker, with pride in his chosen vocation, turned out a worthy product. No two pieces, even in sets, were exactly alike. The modern idea of interchangeability of parts was entirely undeveloped, and while of course this feature is of incalculable importance and value in modern mechanics, the hand-work displayed at this early period in the fitting and construction of each article of furniture, independent of its mates, is altogether delightful. This characteristic is perhaps even more manifest in the metal manufactures of the day than in furniture.

The early hand-made silver is so very much more pleasing than the finest modern product, that there can be no comparison.

Eli Whitney, making muskets in New Haven—now Whitneyville—in 1809, is supposed to have been the first to make mechanical parts interchangeable, although Mr. George Dudley Seymour thinks it possible that Daniel Burnap, the 18th century Connecticut clock maker, developed the principle and practiced it to some extent.

All who are interested in antique furniture base their regard either upon the utility of the various pieces and their generally admirable construction and beauty of line, or upon the sentiment which is always connected with things ancient, and especially with articles intended for intimate household use. This sentiment regarding furniture must of necessity rest largely in the imagination, for unless one's treasures have a reliable family history, it is ordinarily difficult to obtain definite record regarding them, and to rehabilitate the furniture of bygone years, one must depend largely upon fancy. But he best enjoys his valued pieces who can see reflected in his mirrors the faces of former possessors, and can recreate the people of olden time sitting in his chairs, at his desks, and before his andirons.

Especially is this true as it relates to the productions of early New England. The sturdy rugged character of the Pilgrim and the Puritan

is reflected in the oaken chests and the heavy chairs and tables, relieved a bit later by the elegance of the carved beech and walnut. This type of furniture too typifies in a way the distinctive frugal characteristics of our forbears, for which by the way, all who love old furniture cannot be sufficiently grateful. It is because of this New England thrift, that we are now able to find, and occasionally possess, many treasures. In the early days of New England nothing was thrown away, and little wantonly destroyed. When an article of household furnishing had served its day and generation, it was set aside, removed to the attic or barn, but seldom demolished.

For a couple of centuries if one owned a farm, he derived therefrom all the necessities of life and many of the luxuries. Lumber for his buildings, fine wood for his furniture, his own meat, grain, wool and flax, and even silk. I now have a bit of fringe and a pair of stockings of silk, made by silk worms on my grandfather's farm, and wound, and spun on a flax wheel by my grandmother. It was the one period of personal independence in our history. This characteristic of economy did not so prevail in the South. Wills and inventories would indicate that at one time many pieces of oaken furniture were in use in that locality, but examples are now rarely or never met with.

The character of the Southern furniture differed in many respects from that of New



The elegance of carved walnut.

England. The mechanical and inventive skill was not so ever present in that section, and much of the furniture was imported. The English oak was much darker than ours, and the chests and cupboards made abroad were frequently ornamented with choice woods like ebony and rosewood, which the northern workman endeavored to imitate by using maple stained black and red cedar. In the South there was more wealth and greater extravagance. Thus when a bride came to a home it must be refurnished,—when a planter imported new furniture, having no thrifty garret, the older pieces were often relegated to the negro cabins, where they were generally soon destroyed. Yet within recent years many fine specimens of the later periods have been discovered and rescued from otherwise squalid abodes in the South, things that had once graced the halls and chambers of mansions, but had been superseded by articles of later style and fashion. So in many sections of the South where good furniture is occasionally found, it is more apt to be of the Hepplewhite or Sheraton order, or the later Empire type, rather than of the Chippendale School, and rarely are the earlier examples seen. On the contrary some of the most interesting specimens of Colonial furniture have been discovered under the eaves of some old New England homestead where they had lain unheeded for generations. It cost nothing to retain them so why throw them away.

I have myself seen an oaken chest in an attic, which was so large, that in some time altering the house the room was actually built around it, insomuch that the piece could never be removed without taking it apart. Much has been written in furniture books concerning the earliest of tables known, and designated as "table boards". These have been frequently mentioned in inventories, and some of the finer and more ornate examples are known abroad, but the first Colonial specimen seen by collectors or known to writers, was discovered about twenty years ago by that intelligent and enthusiastic collector the late H. Eugene Bolles, in the garret of a very old house in the town of Essex, Massachusetts, in which the stairway had been so changed that the great table could not be taken out, and thus it had long remained in safety and been forgotten. This table is now in the Metropolitan Museum. More recently another of these remarkable pieces has come to light, and was shown in the former collection of Dr. Wallace Nutting. These tables were twelve to fourteen feet in length, and about two feet wide, and were supported on two or three well designed trestles of oak, shaped like a letter H turned sideways,—a heavy post with chamfered corners and a cross piece top and bottom. These were tied together with a flat string piece through the center of each, keyed in place by pins at the sides of the posts. The board was reversible, both sides showing much evidence of

use. Rockers on chairs were in use much earlier than was formerly supposed, and the genesis of the American rocking chair is probably to be found in the trestle feet of tables and an occasional chest. They were undoubtedly first used on chairs to give them stability and perhaps that they might be the more easily moved across the rough board floor, often sanded. While rockers found on very old chairs are often later additions, many ancient specimens are seen with the "rockers" nearly or quite flat on the bottoms, and projecting but two or three inches beyond the legs. Afterwards they were made longer and curved, and the chair became an auxiliary to the cradle.

Concerning the early Colonial bedsteads little is known. Probably in most cases they were rude box affairs very simply constructed, to hold the bed furnishings, and hardly to be considered as furniture. There must have been instances of well made pieces but they seem to have all disappeared. In an old attic I was once shown a fragment of what was once a bedstead. It was of oak, and the construction was similar to that of the oaken chests of the 17th century. As stated, several Pilgrim cradles have been preserved but apparently no bedsteads are known. Later the slender turned high post bedstead became common. I have heard of one such, found in Connecticut many years ago, having very slight round posts which were ornamented with an entwining vine in relief. This

pattern elaborated was followed later by Chippendale and others. The press bed, the precursor of the folding bed, made to fold up into a wall press, while quite old is not of the earliest type, and is frequently seen.

One reason why the rails of old bedsteads were so high, was that the children's bed—the "trundle bed"—might be rolled under it out of the way during the day. Another arrangement for the little ones was a railing similar to a small ladder, which fastened edgewise to the bed rail, served as a balustrade that the babies might not roll out of the dangerously high bed. The rope lacing or the stretched canvas formed the primitive spring mattress.

It has been shown that the colonists made rapid progress in home-making. Comfort succeeded safety, and as they gained affluence, they demanded elegance, and during the next century, (the 18th) particularly the latter half, importations increased, but much beautiful furniture was made in this country. Some was fashioned after the imported pieces, our cabinet makers, however, often adapting rather than slavishly imitating patterns, and indeed frequently improving on the English originals. Thus there are no English chests of drawers or dressing tables, to compare in elegance or beauty with the Philadelphia "high boys" or "low boys", and excepting certain high grade Chippendale examples, there are few scrutoirs or bureaus of English origin as fine and dignified as the

“block front” and “serpentine” pieces made in New England.

The finest furniture made, and to be seen in this country, was in and about Philadelphia, although in New England were makers whose output while lacking the ornamentation and elegance of the Pennsylvania pieces, had a grace and character of its own difficult to excel. It may be said that the work of John Goddard, of Newport, has since hardly been equalled. Eliphalet Chapin of South Windsor was a local cabinet maker of good taste and execution. His product seemed to have an individual style, and numerous examples are known which by their similarity of lines, justify us in attributing them to this Connecticut furniture maker.

Some years later, early in the 19th century, another of the name—Deacon Aaron Chapin,—removed to Hartford from Chicopee, and with his son for nearly forty years, made furniture in Hartford, maintaining an enviable reputation for honesty and thoroughness. Rev. Dr. Thomas Robbins, the first librarian of the Connecticut Historical Society records in his diary on March 2nd, 1807, “got a very fine cherry case at Hartford which Mr. Chapin had made for me. Paid for it forty-four Dollars”

Previous to the Revolution, Philadelphia was the center of wealth and luxury, and had its aristocracy. It was greater in extent than New York or Boston. As late as 1765, New York was hardly more than a Dutch trading

post, and Boston while cultured then as always, was a small city of rather a prim and Puritanic character, certainly not a town where luxury and extravagance prevailed. There were men of wealth among the early settlers of Philadelphia, and to reinforce these came out younger members of distinguished families, who with the opportunities afforded in the new land, were in due time able to emulate the surroundings of elegance and refinement to which they were formerly accustomed.

During this period the Philadelphians imported beautiful and expensive furniture as well as created it. During recent years some of the choicest examples of Chippendale's work have come to light in their city. And although at the beginning of the Revolution Philadelphia was the capital of the infant republic, and later sheltered the royal troops as well as those of the Continental army, there was among its citizens such an element of tories and pacifists as well as patriots, that the city as a whole did not suffer from war's devastation, and little of the now priceless contents of homes was destroyed.

While the lover of old furniture may regret and deplore the present high and apparently advancing values placed upon fine and interesting examples, it is undoubtedly true that the extravagant prices of late years have drawn from their retirement many beautiful and remarkable specimens which were undreamed of by the early collectors and writers.

Less than twenty years ago a perspicacious collector of New York, bought in London at an exorbitant figure, a pair of wonderful chairs, and the advertisement and notoriety of this sale—a mad American abroad with a check book,—brought out from different hiding places in England and France, the other ten hitherto unknown, of what is probably the finest set of Chippendale chairs in existence. A friend of mine was in England at the time, and later wrote to me of this occurrence, and sent me a small photograph of one of these chairs. They belonged to two old gentlewomen in Yorkshire, then in straightened circumstances. A friend persuaded them to put the pieces on sale at Christy's where they hoped they might receive for them as much as sixty pounds. When announcement was made by telegram that their two old chairs had been sold for one thousand pounds they were nearly overcome.

The walnut wood was much used in the manufacture of fine furniture even in the latter 17th century, and that used then and later by our cabinet makers appears to differ somewhat from the modern black walnut of the West, both in color and texture. Indeed, it was termed "red walnut". A piece of this old walnut of good grain, with color softened by many applications of varnish, is often difficult to distinguish from mahogany,—but the latter, of all woods, is the finest material for cabinet work. It has all the requirements, strength, hardness, color and



One of a pair of wonderful chairs.

grain. Nothing can be finer than a good bit of "crotch grain" mahogany mellowed by age. The beautiful veneers were sawn from such portions of the log,—where a large branch joined the trunk of the tree,—producing the curly and diversified grain so much admired.

Do you remember how, while waiting to be served in Gray's Inn Coffee House, David Copperfield brooding at his table, saw himself "reflected in unruffled depths of old mahogany"? Never was a better description of beautiful old wood. Ancient crotch grain mahogany in a way resembles malachite, in that one can apparently see into it, far below the surface.

I feel that no real furniture has been made for a hundred years. The "Empire style" so called, was the last. The decadence then began. The design and style of much of the Empire furniture was poor, but the wood employed was generally fine,—much of it was beautiful—and the workmanship itself excellent. Our "American Empire" seemed to be a cross between the real Empire styles of France and the debased patterns of the late Sheraton period. Yet some of the latter examples while almost grotesque in form, show most beautiful work in the way of ornamentation and delicate carving.

The brasses of some of the Empire pieces were oftentimes fine and even artistic. The drawer pulls of these were most generally of embossed patterns,—as were those of Hepplewhite and Sheraton furniture—formed of sheet

brass struck up in steel dies, but the elaborate mounts were cast, and on some of the finer imported articles were commonly tooled after being taken from the moulds, and frequently finished in "fire gilt". In this process the surface of the article was covered with gold nearly pure, mixed in an amalgam, and with a blow pipe the mercury was later burned off and dissipated, the gold remaining in a lustrous finish which could be burnished if desired.

These fire gilt and ormolu ornaments were often very beautiful. I have in mind a little panel taken from a choice piece of French furniture, representing two little cupids carrying a third in a hammock of flowers, the whole as fine as a cameo, equaling in grace and beauty any old Wedgwood.

Similarly the old rolled plate, "Sheffield plate" is hardly equalled by modern work. The principal interest perhaps in Sheffield plate consists in the cunning silversmithing. It was discovered by accident in 1742 that a thin plate of silver "sweat" or soldered to a thicker plate of copper, could be rolled as thin as desired, each metal retaining its proportionate thickness. This silver coated sheet was then fashioned into all manner of utensils, but the joints of solder must not show, there being no method of covering them subsequently. In candlesticks for instance, all the work must be done from the inside, hence it becomes very difficult to properly repair a piece of old Sheffield. Directly, of course,

after the introduction of the electro process a hundred years later, the fine old rolled plate was superseded.

One of the very worst features of modern furniture is the labor saving method of doweling the joints, instead of the more difficult, and pains-taking process of mortise and tenon. By the latter mode, even when shrunken and loose, the furniture was still strong. It was a common, even a general practice in the construction of turned chairs to have the rungs absolutely dry, and the legs of wood not so well seasoned. When the rungs with the ends turned a shade larger than at the shoulder, were forced into the holes in the legs, after the latter had thoroughly shrunk, the joint was almost as firm as though welded. Of course the early furniture was not constructed to meet the heat requirements of our modern houses with the super dry atmosphere. So it is well that when a valuable piece must be restored, that the work should be done in the midst of artificial heat, in order that it may then shrink all that it will. And with an article fresh from an attic, however dry, it is prudent to remove at once any transverse cleats that may be on a wide board—as the top of a sideboard for example—as all wood shrinks edgewise and flat-wise only, and the cleats by remaining stationary will inevitably cause the board to warp or split.

In the Colonial houses with their open fires and wide ventilating fire places, no such strain

was put upon the cabinet work of the time. In pieces where large turnings prevail, like pillar tables for instance, possible modernness may sometimes be detected by carefully taking the diameters with calipers,—very old turnings should never be round, not having shrunk evenly. Certain other features in modern reproductions may not be detected with equal certainty, however. Some forgeries are done so skilfully as to challenge the best judgment of the expert. The oft suggested method of simulating worm-holes, by firing bird shot into old wood of course is nonsense, but the clever forger is an adept in expedients. I remember once examining an apparently fine old Chippendale chair in company with the late Patrick Stevens. I am glad to recall that my first impression of the piece was unfavorable, but persistent scrutiny almost swerved one's judgment, so beautifully was the chair constructed, so admirably were the marks of wear made to appear. The weight of the article was against it, it being much too light, but Mr. Stevens called my attention to the mars and bruises on the piece—and they were many,—as being all made by one instrument, rather than by duster, or broom or children's feet, and as the general result of long continued use. I thought this analysis very clever.

While much of our fine old furniture is related directly or indirectly to that of the great masters of the last half of the 18th century, we must still bear in mind that a great deal of high

quality and beautiful design was constructed in England, and to some extent copied by our own cabinet makers, long before the time of Chippendale. We do not know to whom to ascribe these fine pieces, there were artists, however, in those days. Several unimportant books of designs were published before Chippendale's, but these styles took the names of the reigning sovereigns rather than those of the makers. The late Charles L. Pendleton liked to attribute his famous "mirror back" chairs to Grinling Gibbons, who lived until 1721, and there is some evidence to support his contention. In the late Richard Canfield's collection was a marvelous mirror frame, so fine and wonderful in the execution of its carving, that it would seem as if bronze were the only material from which it could be produced. This indeed might possibly be the handiwork of Gibbons. But Chippendale seems to have been the first well known cabinet maker whose designs particularly impressed, and whose work was directly followed by our local workmen. While in a sense he did not originate, he was a master in that he adapted and improved the best in all styles, into a nearly perfect style of his own. His first book of designs appeared in 1754, and the last edition in 1762, and the consummation of his art is probably expressed in these volumes. He excelled as a chair maker, and certainly the grace and elegance of his productions has never since been approached. In his furniture the first requirement seemed to be



This might be the handiwork of Gibbons.

excellence of construction, then symmetry of line, followed by decoration expressed in carving, for Chippendale used inlay rarely, and apparently only in his later work. He was an artist, and among his friends and patrons were Hogarth, Reynolds and Chambers. He undoubtedly made many pieces with claw and ball feet, but in his books of designs none such are shown, and no sideboards whatsoever. He delighted in curves and generous carving, and yet in his inimitable way he adapted the stiff designs and straight lines of Chinese furniture into a style of his own that was most attractive. "Chinese taste" which prevailed in England during the latter half of the 18th century, introduced and made popular by Sir. William Chambers, constrained the master to meet the demands of fashion in his furniture, and the beautiful gothic back chairs, and charming tables with pierced and fretted legs, as well as many wonderful mirrors, were the results. The Colonial chairs with pierced splats and straight legs either square or moulded, which we designate as Chippendale, are the direct descendents of the beautiful prototype ornamented with delicate carvings and frets.

Following Chippendale came Hepplewhite and later Sheraton. Hepplewhite's work was light and often very graceful, and he relied largely upon inlay for ornamentation, in which he excelled, and some of the work of his school embellished with insets of light and shaded

woods, is very pleasing. Indeed the finest specimens of his work,—which are seldom found in this country—wherein the most delicate carving is used in conjunction with choice inlaying, are perhaps the most beautiful things we can see in 18th century furniture. The construction of his chairs in particular, however, was weak and poor, and one wonders sometimes how so many specimens have been preserved to our day intact.

Sheraton's best work was done towards the close of the century, and some of his carved ornamentation was of a very high order. He was probably a designer only, as were the Brothers Adam. He loved to use wood of beautiful grain in the construction of his furniture, and would frequently in a painstaking way inlay small panels of fine crotch mahogany on surfaces of the same wood of plain grain, there being no contrast in color. And another feature of his work was the profuse adornment of the legs, corners and edges of his pieces with reeding, or beading. One must differentiate between reeding and fluting, although many of the books do not. Split a quill lengthwise, and the convex surface will indicate reeding, while the concave side will represent the flutes. Fluting was used in ornamenting the Colonial work more freely than reeding. The last of Sheraton's work showed deterioration, and his later styles which contained many Empire features were very bad in design.

Of course all the great makers had their imitators and contemporaries. Several of the latter published books of designs and acquired considerable distinction, but the greater part of the furniture of the last half of the 18th century takes the name and follows more or less, the patterns of one of the three masters mentioned. Ince and Mayhew, Manwaring, Shearer and others, as well as the Brothers Adam, produced furniture books, but

Thomas Chippendale's "The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director" 1754,
George Hepplewhite's "The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Guide" 1788,
and

Thomas Sheraton's "The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book" 1791, commonly spoken of as "the Director", "the Guide" and "the Drawing Book", are the three great volumes which illustrate the highest types of 18th century furniture.

Probably all of the very old looking glasses were made abroad, and beveled edge plate was used at an early date. Empire mirrors, however, and even earlier patterns with the cut edge ornaments, were produced in this country freely. Frequently a paper label was glued on the back, indicating the name and abode of the maker. Furniture was occasionally signed, but the paper labels commonly used were not permanent, and are seldom found.

The fact that the ornate and beautiful highboys and lowboys mentioned were made in Philadelphia was for a long time disputed. They were styled "Southern highboys" by many who insisted that they had their origin in that part of the country, when in point of fact little furniture comparatively, was produced in the South, although cabinet makers there were in Baltimore, Annapolis and Charleston. I was particularly anxious to prove the Philadelphia contention, and continually sought evidence and followed up clues. Some ten years ago a fellow collector of Baltimore wrote me that he had just purchased a fine lowboy which would interest me. It did indeed, for on the bottom of the "towel drawer" was pasted the label of the maker.

All Sorts of Chairs and
Joiners Work
Made and Sold by
William Savery
At the Sign of the
Chair, a little be-
low the Market, in
Second Street.
PHILADELPHIA.

I secured excellent photographs of both label and dressing table which later appeared in Mr. Lockwood's "Colonial Furniture in America"—second edition—and the piece itself was subsequently secured by Mr. Lockwood for the Society of the Colonial Dames of New York, and

is now deposited in the VanCortlandt Manor House. In 1918, when the Metropolitan Museum acquired from Mr. George S. Palmer his wonderful examples of American cabinet work, there appeared in the Museum Bulletin a very interesting and logical article wherein the recently discovered William Savery was accredited with a large proportion of the fine Philadelphia cabinet work of the latter 18th Century, which perhaps was a little fanciful.

Generally speaking, I think one is prone to date one's pieces too early rather than too late, for all the various styles were manufactured for considerable periods, and if certain particular articles were popular, they continued to be made after other fashions were introduced. Freak pieces appear occasionally which do not with any certainty denote the date which some of their features might seem to indicate. Let me say that furniture is not necessarily to be desired because it is old or rare,—yet extreme rarity makes many things valuable which might otherwise be commonplace, and age often brings beauty, always respect. Divers articles of ancient furniture are inconvenient and uncomfortable, when measured by the standards of today. The andirons and crane, the hob grate or the Franklin stove, cannot compete or compare with the gas range or the steam furnace, and we rarely find an old fashioned chair easy to sit in. Our ancestors seemed to prefer straight backs to their chairs. Probably like Mrs. Wilfer,

they found it impossible to loll. But of most of the old time furnishings, we may say that they are at least respectable. All the examples are quaint, and many beautiful, and as representing the early taste and industry of our forbears, our colonial furniture is most desirable, and worthy of preservation.

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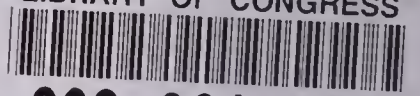


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